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ABSTRACT

A study on teacher communication concerns explored the following questions: (1) to what extent is communication concern expressed after the first quarter of college teaching, and (2) does the type of communication concern expressed vary by quarter? The experiences of two new faculty members at a western university provided the data source for the study. The first data source was a measurement of the faculty members' concerns about communication. The second source of data ws a series of 1- to 2-hour interviews with the new faculty members, conducted at approximately 2- to 3-week intervals. A total of 103 communication concerns were identified during the academic year by the two new faculty. While the number of concerns expressed during the autumn quarter were significantly greater, the expression of concern continued after the initial quarter of teaching. Concerns about self, task, and impact were expressed during all three quarters and not in a systematic or sequential manner. (MG)

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Communication in New Faculty Socialization: An Extension of Teacher Communication Concern

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to extend previous research on teacher communication concern. Here, the concern strategies used by individuals to reduce uncertainty about their teaching role during the course of an academic year were investigated.

Results suggest that teacher communication concern is evident throughout the first academic year of teaching and that the type of concern expressed is not limited to any particular quarter.

Communication plays an integral role in the process of socialization. The role of communication in the socialization of academicians has received increased attention in recent years (c.f. Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1987). Studies have emphasized the importance of communication in the socialization of department chairpersons (Staton-Spicer & Spicer, 1987) and graduate students (Bach & Bullis, 1987; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Darling, 1986, 1987) and generally conclude that it is through talk with others that newcomers negotiate the developing individual-organization relationship. In short, communication activities and interactions are important aspects of socialization (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986).

Although newcomers learn much during the socialization process (Feldman, 1981; Louis, 1980), reducing role uncertainty is essential to developing a successful individual-organization relationship. Wentworth (1980) states that issues related to role identity and commitment are central to socialization research. This argument is supported by Feldman (1981) who suggests that newcomers need to identify and clarify their role in the organization. He asserts that newcomers try to define exactly what tasks they have to accomplish, how they will be accomplished, and the priority given to each task (Feldman, 1981). Hence, reducing role uncertainty is a key to developing individual-organization relationships.

One way of reducing uncertainty is to identify communication strategies by which individuals can acquire information to take on organizational roles (Darling, 1986; Wilson, 1986). Recent studies on socialization in academics adopt a communication concern framework to explain uncertainty reduction. Originally conceptualized by Staton-Spicer and Bassett (1979) and refined by Staton-Spicer (1983), communication concern is defined as "a constructive frustration or anticipation of a future problem situation which involves participation in face-to-face interaction" (Staton-Spicer & Basset, 1979, p. 140). Specifically, the framework suggests that organizational newcomers (e.g., instructors) are concerned about their communication and that these concerns focus around the self as communicator, the task of communicating, and the impact of their communication upon others (e.g., students). Identification and articulation of these concerns to others act as socialization strategies to reduce uncertainty about individual role (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986; 1987).

Previous research on communication concerns has found that as individuals seek to reduce role uncertainty the expression of concern changes over time. A study by Staton-Spicer and Bassett (1979) found that prospective teachers were more concerned with self, while student teachers were concerned with task, and inservice teachers expressed greater concern

with impact. Research of university teaching assistants produced similar results. Book and Eisenberg (1979) discovered that concerns changed over time and shifted from concern about self to concern about task. Finally, in a case study about a university instructor, Staton-Spicer and Marty-White (1981) found that communication concerns changed in a pattern consistent with the above research.

Critique

While the communication concern framework has proven fruitful for the identification of communication strategies used to reduce uncertainty in the developing individual-organization relationship, previous research can be expanded to more fully explain the socialization process.

Research on communication concerns at the university level has been limited to those concerns expressed only during initiation of the individual-organization relationship. Studies have been limited to investigating the concerns expressed during the first (e.g, autumn) quarter of college teaching. By limiting their research to the first quarter of teaching, researchers have identified communication concerns which occur during the beginning of the socialization process. While the study of these initial socialization experiences is a useful foundation, there is evidence to suggest that

socialization is not a time limited process. Bach and Bullis (1987) suggest that socialization experiences may not be limited to temporal phases in the development of the individual-organization relationship but occur throughout an individual's tenure with an organization. Hence, as the individual-organization relationship develops during the second and third quarters, the number and type of communication concerns may change.

Previous research reviewed above has demonstrated that communication concern is somewhat systematic and sequential when studied during the first academic quarter. There is no compelling theoretical rationale or empirical demonstration to conclude that the socialization process, or communication concerns, are wholly developed at the end of an academic quarter and largely static thereafter. Hence, it may be that continuing development occurs throughout the academic year and is of interest.

Purpose

The concern literature has been temporally limited in its approach. The purpose of this paper is to extend previous research and identify the communication concern strategies used by individuals to reduce uncertainty about their teaching role during the course of an academic year. Specifically, the research was guided by two research questions:

RQ1: To what extent is communication concern expressed after the first quarter?

RQ2: Does the type of communication concern expressed vary by quarter?

Method

Participants

The experiences of two new faculty members at a Western university provided the data base for this study. Both of these faculty members were new to the role of professor and had been recently hired to teach in two different departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. One faculty member, Dan, a non-tenured assistant professor, came from a large mid-Western university where he had been a teaching assistant. Larry, a visiting assistant professor, returned to teaching from a research position at a university on the east coast. Both articulated a desire to work in a university setting because of the freedom and autonomy usually found in academics.

Data Collection

During the first week of the academic year, the researcher obtained the names of all new tenure-track and visiting faculty who had never before taught at her university. Because of a hiring freeze the previous academic year, only 2 tenure track and 6 full-time visiting professors had been hired.

All eight new faculty were contacted, with only two agreeing to participate in the study. Many of the new faculty members expressed reluctance to make the time commitment necessary to generate data for this project.

Data were gathered in two ways. The first data base was a measurement of the faculty member's concerns about communication and used a model initially developed by Staton-Spicer and Basset (1979) and refined by Staton-Spicer and Marty-White (1981). Specifically, the new faculty were asked to complete a weekly teaching log where they were asked to a) identify the individuals with whom they talked about any aspect of their teaching, and b) describe the nature and content of the interaction with the person(s) identified (Staton-Spicer & Marty-White, 1981). Both new faculty kept track of their conversations throughout the academic year using this log. New logs were delivered to the two faculty and completed logs were retrieved at approximately 3 week intervals. A total of nine logs were received from both faculty and contained data from October through May of the academic year.

The second source of data was a series of one to two hour interviews with the new faculty members, conducted at approximately two to three week intervals (4 interviews autumn quarter, 4 winter, and 3 spring). The interview method was used to gather individual accounts of socialization

experiences. A typical interview began with the researcher asking the faculty member to elaborate upon the information reported in his teaching log. Questions were standardized and were designed to generate information about communication concerns and socialization experiences. Probes were used as necessary to maintain the communication-oriented focus of the interview. Following Staton-Spicer and Darling (1986), several questions overlapped with the information contained in the weekly logs to help verify what was written and serve as a reliability check. The interviews from autumn quarter were tape recorded and transcribed. During winter and spring, responses to interview questions were recorded in detail during the interview. As suggested by Lofland and Lofland (1984) immediately after each interview, the researcher would reread her notes to expand upon the information provided during the interview. This procedure added detail and richness to the responses.

Data Analysis

To determine the faculty member's concerns about communication, a procedure employed by Staton-Spicer and Marty-White (1981) for analyzing qualitative communication concern data was employed. Initially, the researcher read through the interview transcriptions and notes and placed parentheses around every statement which expressed a concern. These

statements were generally sentences or paragraphs, but some were phrases or clauses. Once the communication concerns were identified, they were coded by the researcher into one of the four concern categories of self, task, impact, or other. As a reliability check, a second coder was employed to independently code 20% of the data into the same four categories, resulting in an absolute agreement of .90. Reliability using Cohen's (1960) kappa was .84.

Results

Research Question One

A total of 103 communication concerns were identified during the academic year by the two new faculty. These concerns were evenly divided between the two--Dan reported 53 concerns during the academic year while Larry reported 50. The new faculty did report communication concerns during all three quarters of the academic year. An even distribution of the concerns by quarter was also found. Dan reported 29 concerns during autumn quarter (55%), 15 concerns winter quarter (28%), and 9 concerns during spring quarter (17%), while Larry's concerns were 24 (48%), 13 (26%), and 13 (26%), respectively (Table 1).

A chi-square analysis revealed that the total number of concerns reported during autumn quarter was significantly greater (X^2 = 15.89, d.f. = 2, p<.001). Additionally, both Dan and Larry individually reported a greater number of concerns during autumn quarter (X^2 = 11.56, d.f. = 1, p<.01; X^2 = 5.12, d.f. = 1, p<.05). There was no significant difference between Dan and Larry in the number of concerns they reported by quarter (X^2 = 1.72, d.f = 2, n.s.).

Table 1

Number of Reported Concerns by Quarter

	Autumn	%	Winter	%	Spring	%
Dan	29	55	15	28	9	17
Larry	24	48	13	26	13	26
TOTAL	53	51	28	27	22	21

Research Question Two

The second research question was asked to determine if the type of communication concern could be characterized by quarter. For both Dan and Larry, all three types of communication concern were expressed across the academic year (Tables 2, 3). A chi-square analysis revealed that the type

of concern reported did not differ by quarter for either Dan (X^2 = 1.05, d.f. = 4, n.s.) or Larry (X^2 = 4.76, d.f. = 4, n.s.).

Table 2

Type of Concern by Quarter - Dan

	Self	Task	Impact
Autumn	12	9	8
Winter	6	5	4
Spring	2	3	4
TOTAL	20	17	16

Table 3

Type of Concern by Quarter - Larry

	Self	Task	Impact
Autumn	11	6	7
Winter	7	3	3
Spring	3	7	3
TOTAL	21	16	13

Concerns about self, task, and impact were expressed throughout the academic year and followed much the same form described by Staton-Spicer and Marty-White (1981) in their case study of a university professor. Concerns about self largely involved expressing concern about credibility, competence, and adequacy as a professor. Dan reported the following concern about self during mid-term autumn quarter:

> I'm just one step ahead of the students in my 547 class and I need to know more, to research things a little bit more. I don't really know that much and so I just stay ahead of them in the book. I've really got to find out about certain things they ask questions about. Some of them I really don't know the answer to. I'm not really aware of what's [the research] going on.

Larry reported this concern about self during the last week of autumn quarter:

> I've got a graduate seminar [next quarter] and it will be the first time I've done a graduate seminar. What's going to happen if nobody shows up? I'm beginning to feel that maybe I won't have anybody sign up for the course. And what's going to happen then?

Concerns about task centered around instructional duties and involved concern about using the proper teaching technique or method and finding the right approach to communicate course information. During autumn quarter, Dan repeatedly expressed concern with "how much to lecture and how much to do from the book." During winter quarter Larry admitted to "obsessing about examples and putting more effort into thinking about examples," and in spring quarter he reported having "a real struggle with course content because I have a real mixed bag with alot of students with different needs."

Finally, concerns about impact focused upon concern about the effect of the instructor's communication upon the students. At the end of autumn quarter, Dan had the following to say about impact:

The relationship with the students is going well. I think I've gotten to know them and now in both courses, you know, they talk and ask questions a whole lot more. So I think at least that I've achieved some openness in the classroom.

During mid-term fall quarter, Larry expressed concern about his students' failure to understand a point in lecture, "if I see they're really losing touch, going to sleep or looking [at me] in pain I try to put something in [the lecture] to keep them awake until the end of the class." He expressed a similar concern during mid-spring quarter when he wondered, "if the

undergraduates are understanding or comprehending the information as they sit passively [during lecture]."

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to identify the communication concerns used by new faculty to reduce uncertainty about their teaching role during the course of an academic year. Two new faculty members were interviewed throughout their first academic year of teaching and the data gathered were subjected to qualitative analysis.

Results of the first research question suggest that the expression of communication concern is not limited to the first quarter of teaching but is expressed throughout the academic year. While the number of concerns expressed during the autumn quarter were significantly greater, the expression of concern continued after the initial quarter of teaching. Two reasons might account for this finding.

First, the results are consistent with many socialization models which assume that uncertainty is highest during the initial development of the individual-organization relationship (c.f. Bullis & Bach, 1989). These models suggest that individuals communicate more frequently early in the

development of the individual-organization relationship in an attempt to reduce role uncertainty.

Conversely, the data may be skewed by the method used to gather information on communication concern. While intensive interviews were conducted with the new faculty all three quarters, the data gathered during the first quarter were tape recorded and transcribed word-for- word, producing significantly more data than what was gathered during winter and spring quarters (despite the best efforts of the researcher to accurately write responses to interview questions). As such, the larger volume of data for the first quarter may have produced a larger number of communication concerns. An equal number of communication concerns might have been identified during winter and spring quarters if those data had also been tape recorded and subsequently transcribed.

What is more interesting is that concerns about self, task, and impact were expressed during all three quarters and not in a systematic or sequential manner. While previous communication concern studies suggest that individuals first express concern about self and later note concern about task and impact, the data in this research did not follow previous patterns. No one type of concern was expressed more frequently than another in any given quarter. Hence, the lack of pattern in the expression of communication

concern suggests that the expression of concern about self, task, and impact cannot be limited to initial encounter with the organization but are continuous throughout the socialization experience (c.f. Bullis & Bach, 1989).

The above findings suggest that new faculty express concern about their communication throughout the academic year. Despite the fact that more concerns are expressed during initial stages of the individual-organization relationship, new faculty continue to express concern about their teaching. The structure of academics might account, in part, for this finding. Although concern might be greatest during the first quarter of teaching, concern continues to be expressed during the second and third quarters when new courses are prepared and new students are taught. It is not uncommon for new faculty to have several new course preparations throughout the first academic year of teaching. It is very likely that a number of concerns are expressed with the preparation and teaching of each new class.

What these data suggest is that new faculty concern does not cease with the turning in of grades at the end of the first quarter but probably lasts until each new course has been prepared and taught, perhaps longer. In addition to being available to talk with new faculty during the first quarter, department veterans might consider the importance of providing

encouragement and feedback to new faculty throughout the initial academic year.

Several limitations with regard to gathering and analyzing communication concern are evident. First, the amount of expressed concern may be limited by the number of colleagues or students with whom the new faculty member communicates. Dan came from a very collegial department where he was one of three faculty who had been hired within the last two years. He spoke frequently with his colleagues about his teaching and reported talking about his teaching concerns eighteen times during autumn quarter and 12 times during winter quarter. Larry, on the other hand, spoke with only one person during the autumn term. Larry lamented on several occasions to the researcher that if he had not participated in this project, he would have had no colleague with whom to communicate about his teaching. It is interesting to note that Larry spoke about his teaching concerns eleven times during the second quarter and that five of those conversations were with colleagues who were out of state.

A second limitation was the difficulty the coders had with data analysis. Even though reliability was a respectable .84, the actual content of the concern was, at times, difficult to decipher. All concerns expressed by the new faculty had a relational component and expressed an underlying

concern about impact--how student learning was affected. Future interviews might ask respondents to reflect upon whether the concerns reported are self, task, or impact and use this information as a reliability check after data has been coded.

Despite the limitations of this study, it was found that communication concern is evident throughout the academic year and that there is no specific pattern to the expression of self, task, or impact.

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